

# Models of Catechesis: Alternatives to the Traditional Grade-Level, Weekly, Classroom Approach

by Dr. Joseph D. White

## Why are we looking for alternatives?

- Parents are not involved in their children's catechesis
- Adults in the parish are not (being) formed.
- Families are not practicing the faith in their daily lives.
- Difficult to recruit, train and retain catechists for all grades in a weekly program.
- "DRE" doesn't really stand for "directly responsible for everything."
- Kids say "it's boring" – especially after being at school all day/all week.
- Many Catholic families are not registering for traditional, weekly, grade-level catechesis.

## The Formation Landscape (Matijasevic/CARA, 2017)

- Elementary Religious Education: 2,529,000
- High School Religious Education: 599,105
- Baptized as infants: 670,481
- Baptized as minors: 67,052
- Baptized as Adults: 37,953
- Adults Received into Church: 63,951
- First Communion: 714,871
- Confirmations: 567,739
- Marriages in the Church: 145,916
- Pastoral Associates, Catechetical Leaders, Social Concerned Ministers  
Enrolled in Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation: 23,681
- Active Lay Ecclesial Ministers: 39,651

## HCFM/CARA data on religious education (2015)

- 68% of Catholic parents do not have their children enrolled in any type of formal religious education
- Only 22% of Catholics attend Mass weekly
- Only 42% of weekly Mass attending families have their kids enrolled in religious education.

## Is there anything good about the status quo?

- At least some people are being formed.
- We know how to do it.
- There are some reasons why texts are important.

### 3 Reasons Why Books Might Still Be Important

- They present a comprehensive overview of the faith
- They provide precise theological language
- They can help to make the subject matter developmentally appropriate
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#### Comprehensive Overview

- We tend to talk about our own favorite things. How can we ensure that our learners receive the fullness of Catholic teaching?
- 7 Major Catechetical Themes in USCCB Protocol
- Systematic coverage of the 4 pillars of the *Catechism*

#### Precise Theological Language

- All text is reviewed by USCCB Subcommittee on the *Catechism*
- Catholic Faith Words offer theologically correct and developmentally appropriate definitions of sacred terms.
- Many definitions grow with the learner, including more detail and depth as learners progress from K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

#### Developmental Appropriateness

“heresy by methodology”: The use of teaching methods that are inappropriate for the learner, resulting in a misunderstanding of the material being presented, with the net effect being that the learner comes away from the lesson believing something other than Catholic teaching.

#### Scientific Basis for a Developmental Approach

- Vygotsky and “zones of proximal development”
- Perry: Neurosequential brain development

A balanced strategy: How do we keep what’s good about the traditional approach, but also do something different that might bring better results?

#### Five alternative models:

- Home-based model (parents as catechists)
- Family-gathered sessions
- Home-based model with family gathered sessions
- Summer model
- Summer model with family-gathered sessions

#### Home-based Model

- Parents as catechists
- Potential Advantages
  - Calls parents to their rightful role as primary catechists

- Allows catechetical leaders to focus on priorities other than weekly grade-level sessions, such as better sacramental preparation, RCIA, adult faith formation
- Potential Challenges
  - Parents might not follow through
  - Parents might not be well-formed to form their children
  - Loss of larger community experience of formation
- Potential Solutions
  - System of accountability (e.g., e-assessments)
  - Parent formation sessions (or at least orientation)
  - Combine with family-gathered model and/or other family events.

#### Family-Gathered Model

- Periodic whole-family sessions covering major catechetical themes
- Can include breakouts into age-level groups
- Potential Advantages
  - Gives parents coaching and practice with talking to their children about faith
  - Forms adults AND children
  - Provides a unique community experience of the faith
- Potential Challenges
  - Time in between sessions might be too great if there is no follow-up
  - A few sessions in the year doesn't allow for the depth of a more comprehensive approach
  - Didn't we try that before?
- Potential Solutions
  - Assessments, "study halls" (e.g., Holy Cross Parish in Atlanta, GA)
  - Need a plan that includes active learning approaches, multi-sensory experiences, community interaction and enough "meat" to make it feel worthwhile
  - Combining family gathered model with home sessions or summer model

#### Home-Based Model with Family Gathered Sessions

##### St. Joseph, Bogota, NJ

- Parents & children come together to monthly sessions
- Options: several Sunday morning options (1.5hrs long) followed by Mass OR Tuesday evening (6:30pm-8pm)
- Sunday mornings we have a light breakfast (bagels, crumb cake, coffee, juice)
- Tuesday evenings we have pizza
- Grades 7, 8, and high school students come several more times throughout the year (students only) because they feel teens require the extra attention

- Parents are doing the book work at home with their children
- Grades PreK & Kindergarten do *Allelu!* activities (we send 4 lessons home per month)
- Grades 1-5 do book work for hw
- Grades 6-8 do online assessments as hw (3 chapters per month)
- They also create a "Gospel Questions" handout (2 questions per Sunday Gospel - they do the whole month)

Results: **“Overall, parent involvement is great. We've had parents tell us that they learn so much, that they often have discussions on what happened at the session, etc. I really feel like we're equipping parents to pass on the faith. It is all about the family! There's been a lot of talk about the future of catechesis, and I whole-heartedly believe that a family program is it.”**

**--Chi Nguyen, DRE**

#### Home-Based Model with Family Gathered Sessions

St. Agnes Parish, Clark, NJ

- In second year of a family program
- Families gather six times per year
- The rest of the time, they use home-based sessions and e-assessments
- **“It’s a work in progress. What I can say for sure though that this is the direction I’m trying to take St. Agnes in. The program doubled in size this year and I anticipate it will continue to grow. The thing that I find interesting is that this program attracts the church-going families. I had worried that families would take this option so they only had to come to Church six times.”** –Jeanne Fox, DRE

#### Summer Model

- Children gather in age level groups on a daily basis for two weeks of half days or one week of full days, covering a whole grade level in an intensive summer session
- Potential advantages
  - Intensive nature of this model allows for immersion in the experience.
  - A whole new pool of catechists becomes available.
  - Frees the DRE to focus on other priorities during the school year (RCIA, Adult Faith Formation, family events, sacramental preparation)
  - Families CAN work this into their schedules.
  - Kids aren’t tired from school all day/week – might be more eager to come and gather with peers.
- Potential Challenges
  - Will families “check out” of parish participation during the school year?
  - Won’t children forget what they learned?

- What do we do all day? Work in the workbook? Won't that be BORING?
- Potential Solutions
  - Family events through the year with an accountability system
  - Combine with family-gathered model?
  - Plan for using the texts in creative ways, with multi-sensory experiences, active learning approaches.

#### Example: Summer Model

##### St. Joseph's, Tom's River, NJ

- This is the first year they don't have a traditional model at all. The year before they offered both and ended up with very small groups in traditional model.
- 2 sessions of one week each. Had twice as many register after they had the full day option.
- Every catechist is a fully-certified teacher during the school year – leads to better-quality instruction. Mostly public school teachers
- Each day closes with a prayer service with the pastor.
- They also have IEPs for children with special needs
- They are the only parish in Tom's River doing a summer model. Parishioners from other area parishes "beg them" to come in.
- Best part – "Kids LOVE to be there. They keep coming and want to learn. They are retaining not just day to day, but year to year."
- No drop-off in enrollment between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, no drop in number of kids participating when shifted to summer model: 1200 kids in the program.

#### How they solved the challenges:

- "We want to see them during the year!" They stress weekly Mass attendance. They also give them a calendar of activities and they are expected to attend a certain number of them throughout the year – (e.g., social picnic, Christmas Carol concert, All Saints Mass). They check in with them and they give priority registration to families that fulfill that responsibility.
- They also do family catechesis with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. They come 2-3 times on Saturday afternoons with adults and they are prepared for 1<sup>st</sup> penance (same for 1<sup>st</sup> communion, confirmation).

#### Doing a Little of Everything

##### Jill McAvoy, Prince of Peace in Houston

- Inherited traditional model and summer intensive in English, but now has offered family catechetical program, homeschool, and summer intensive in Spanish. Trying to move to a more family-oriented process. That respects parents as primary catechists, but they have so many people in so many

- different life situations—single parents, divorced parents with limited custody.
- Mostly school teachers teaching in summer.
  - K-5 1300 children
  - Majority in weekly and summer program
  - 370 in Eng and 350 Spanish in traditional
  - summer: 3<sup>rd</sup> summer -- 70 first year to 180 second year; they expect another doubling this year
  - Family program: 57 families in English and 70 in Spanish.
  - 14 in home-based model

FOR MORE INFORMATION about family-gathered, home-based or summer program catechesis, contact Our Sunday Visitor at [www.osv.com](http://www.osv.com) or 1-800-348-2440.

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